China-India-United States Triangle

in the Indian Ocean Region and Indo-Pacific

Towards a Win-Win Result

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Abstract: This paper argues that unlike the rising sensations that the nature of China-India-United States relations in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and Indo-Pacific is rivalrous and zero-sum, it is not only necessary but also possible for the three powers to form a triangle that could produce a win-win result for three sides. After examining the increasing significance of the IOR and Indo-Pacific and reviewing existing concerns about the conflictual nature of the relations, the paper identified a number of key areas that are in the enlarging interests shared by three sides. The paper also explored into the possible disputes among the three and concluded that these clashes are generally manageable. Last but not the least, it is worrisome that China is not incorporated in most of the existing or proposed regional multilateral mechanisms or platforms in the IOR or the Indo-Pacific. To find a possible way out, the paper proposes to establish either a formal or track 1.5/2 dialogue among China-India-U.S. to level up mutual trust and manage possible disputes. Besides, the author also put forward several not only necessary, but also plausible steps that the three need to take to achieve a win-win result.

Key Words: China-India-United States  Indian Ocean Region  Indo-Pacific  Win-Win Result
A. Overview

1. The Rising Indian Ocean Region and the Indo-Pacific

International relations since modern times have been largely defined by the geopolitical balance among great powers. The map of Europe, together with wars and peace among European powers determined world politics of the nineteenth and most periods of twentieth century. Since the end of the Cold War, Asia-Pacific, once a geographical term, has become a geopolitical concept and reality central to the world politics during past two decades. This is not only because the region has been the world’s fastest engine for economic growth, and thus an imperative platform of game-playing between major existing and rising regional and global powers, including but not limited to the United States, China, Japan, Republic of Korea, Australia, the ASEAN, etc.

Compared to the Atlantic and the Pacific Ocean, for most of time since modern history, the Indian Ocean was only ranked in a subordinate or secondary place in geopolitics and international relations, and its importance to major powers have been underestimated over time. If the Atlantic and the Pacific, as well as Trans-Atlantic and Trans-Pacific inter-state relations as discussed above, were the very icons of world map in past two centuries, the Indian Ocean in recent few years may have become as iconic to the coming decades as the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans to the past. In this sense, the geographical term closely related to Indian Ocean Region, the Indo-Pacific has drawn world-wide attentions, and gradually evolved into a geo-economic, geo-political and geo-strategic concept. As a result, never in history before has the strategic importance of Indian Ocean Region (IOR) been underscored in such an unprecedented way. This focus on the Indian Ocean has been highlighted by writings such as Robert Kaplan’s Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power\(^1\) published in 2010. Just as depicted by one of the first and most important literature on

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the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean, authored by Robert Kaplan on *Foreign Affairs* in 2009, the Indian Ocean -- the world's third-largest body of water -- already forms center stage for the challenges of the twenty-first century. Against the background of the global power shift from the traditional West to the emerging East, the Indian Ocean has ‘joined to the western Pacific would truly be at the strategic heart of the world’.

The uniqueness and significance of the Indian Ocean Region and Indo-Pacific could be characterized as follows. Firstly, the IOR is one of the world’s most politically, economically and culturally diverse regions. There are 48 independent countries, 18 in Africa, 11 in the Middle East, 7 in South Asia, 6 in South East Asia, 5 island states; and Australia, three of the world’s largest (U.S., China and Japan) and seven of the 10 smallest economies. Secondly, the Indo-Pacific is geographically massive and densely populated, encompasses more than half the Earth's surface and more than half its total population. Thirdly, countries surrounding IOR and across the Indo-Pacific form the most powerful engines of world economy. The open accessible sea lanes throughout the Asia Pacific annually enjoy over $8 trillion in bilateral trade with one-third of the world's bulk cargo and two-thirds of the oil shipments sailing to and from nine of the world's 10 largest economic ports which are in this part of the world.

Fourthly, the Indo-Asia Pacific is also the world's most militarized region with seven of the 10 largest standing armies (U.S., China, India, Russia, Vietnam, Republic of Korea and DPRK), the world's largest and most sophisticated navies (U.S., China, India and Russia) and five of the world's declared nuclear armed nations (U.S., China, India, Russia and DPRK).

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2. The Rivalry among China, India and the U.S.? 

The shift of global geographical gravity to the greater Indo-Pacific and increasing importance of the Indian Ocean may present the future balance of established and most prominent rising powers in this region, as defined by China, India and the United States. In recent years, a good number of critics tend to define the forming triangle in the IOR as potential strategic rivalry mainly between China and India, and even more sensationally, as forthcoming security dilemma among the three actors. There is a popular concern that the IOR in the near future may resemble what happens in the West Pacific today, which is characterized by unsettled territorial and maritime disputes.

Due to its historical and geographical pre-eminence, India has long been one of the most dominating power, if not the monopoly, of the Indian Ocean Region. The Indian peninsula juts about 1,000 miles into the Indian Ocean and is the ‘only feasible linkage’ between the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea and the Malacca and the Andaman Straits. Thus, ‘very few nations in the world geographically dominate an ocean area as India dominates the Indian Ocean’. Indians have an instinct to regard the Indian Ocean within India’s sphere of influence, and has a vital stake in the region. Nehru’s fear of the dominance of Indian Ocean by any outside power, which threatens not only India’s trade flow but also its national independence, has been translated into India’s successive efforts in investing in its maritime capacities in the IOR, especially after the end of the Cold War. According to Indian Navy’s Maritime Capabilities Perspective Plan, the ambition of Indian’s military strategy is to “dominate the Indian Ocean region by acquiring blue water operational capability while effectively countering current and emerging threats closer to the coastline”, in which the navy plans to expand to a fleet of 150 ships in the next ten to fifteen years, with 50 warships now under construction and 100 new vessels in the acquisition pipeline. The Indian navy is also

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engaged in setting up operational turnaround bases, forward-operating bases, and naval air enclaves with a view to enhancing India’s surveillance efforts in the Indian Ocean region⁹.

Unlike India to the Indian Ocean, China is not by nature an Indian Ocean country. Compared to its vital interests and strong linkages in East Asia and neighboring countries in this region, China’s interests in the Indian Ocean has long been underestimated, if not neglected. However, the fact brought by China’s fast economic growth and increasing global outreach, that China has become the world’s second largest economy, largest trading country, and second largest energy consumer. Particularly, as more than 50% of China’s energy demand comes from abroad, three of China’s main four energy import routes, namely those from the Middle East, Africa and Southeast Asia, have to go through the Indian Ocean¹⁰. There is a real need for China to reshape its mindset and underscore the need for a clearer strategy to safeguard its rising interests in the Indian Ocean. In recent years, China’s increasing interests in Indian Ocean’s freedom and safety of navigation, as well as huge potential in IOR countries’ economic prospect and trade prospect, has brought China closer to the region. As a result, such intentions and attempts could be translated as China’s maritime and regional ambitions in the Indian Ocean Region transcending China’s traditional areas of concern. There’s a sensational description that China’s forming IOR strategy could pose a strategic threat to the interests of India¹¹.

Generally speaking, there are several areas of Indian concerns on China. Firstly, China’s “special” relationship with Pakistan, its military engagement with countries surrounding India and its defensive capacities in Tibet, could diminish India’s premier position in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. Many Indian security analysts worry that China is engaged in the strategic encirclement of India through its nuclear and missile nexus with Pakistan; the

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sale of military hardware to Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka; and a “string of pearls” strategy to surround India with naval bases in the northern Indian Ocean region. Secondly, the long-standing unsettled border disputes between China and India, has somewhat constructed a potential “rivalry” between the two powers. India regards China’s stance on the South China Sea as “behave irresponsibly”, and is concerned about the possible worst-case scenario in the border dispute. To make matters even worse, India feels like “it is the weaker of the two Asian giants, and the gap in capabilities between them is growing in favor of China”.

Another inevitable factor to take into consideration is the role of the U.S. in the tremendous picture of China-India-U.S. triangle. There is an existing or at least emerging U.S. – Indian competition on the dominance of the Ocean, although it is yet that visible amid the looming and exaggerated gaming among China and India. Notwithstanding India’s ambition of dominate the ocean, the U.S. has a growing interests and rising stake in the region. With the publication of the 2010 U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review and the impending release of the National Security Strategy and the new Unified Command Plan, the Indian Ocean region has risen to the forefront of US strategic planning. To make the matters even more complicated, U.S. perceives itself as the very balancing power between India and China, a necessary dynamic to ensure the peace and stability of the region. As Robert Kaplan argued, “Precisely because India and China are emphasizing their sea power, the job of managing their peaceful rise will fall on the U.S. Navy to a significant extent”. However, the consequence of U.S. ambition may not be satisfactory and acceptable, particularly for the rising India and China.

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12 Gurmeet Kanwal, *India’s Military Modernization: Plans and Strategic Underpinnings*, the National Bureau of Asian Research, September 24, 2012
As argued by Robert Kaplan in the same piece, “There will surely be tensions between three navies, especially as the gaps in their relative strength begin to close” 16.

3. China-India-U.S. Triangle: Not a Zero-Sum Game

It is not true that the nature of China-India-United States trilateral relationship in IOR is rivalrous and zero-sum. So far, no major clashes or conflicts have ever happened between the three powers in the region. The regional situation is less tense compared with the Middle East and the West Pacific. Arguments about security dilemma are self-evident periphery. If each one of the three giants continues to be suspicious of others’ intentions, the balance of the triangle could be easily fragile. Surpassing the Atlantic in the 19th century and the Pacific, the Indian Ocean is now becoming the world’s busiest and most strategically significant trade and commercial corridor, with one-third of the world's bulk cargo and two-thirds of oil shipments passing through. In 2012, intra Indo-Pacific trade volume exceeded 8 trillion U.S. dollars. As a result, the strategic, security and economic interests of all three powers becomes more and more overlapping in this region. It is foreseeable that the convergence of their interests among the three could outweigh the proclaimed divergence. Therefore, it is in the vital interest of Beijing, New Delhi and Washington to maintain peace and stability of IOR through joint efforts over the coming decades, to turn the ocean into an ocean of peace rather than of conflict.

B. Enlarging and Shared Interests


With the rise of strategic, political and economic value of the IOR and the Indo-Pacific, leaderships of major powers have begun to attach great importance to this region and made

remarkable policy adjustments. According to former U.S. Secretary of State Clinton, U.S. is stepping up its efforts in “expanding our work with the Indian navy in the Pacific, because we understand how important the Indo-Pacific basin is to global trade and commerce” 17. Australian Defense Minister Stephen Smith also recognized that “the Indo-Pacific is also home to the world’s largest navies, including the navies of the United States, China, India and Russia”, and “the defense of Australia, security, stability and cohesion of our immediate neighborhood and stability in the wider Indo-Pacific – it must now reflect the historic shift of strategic weight to the Indo Pacific” 18. Indian Prime Minister Singh also expressed that India’s “future is inter-linked and a stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region is crucial for our own progress and prosperity”, and thus “the India-ASEAN engagement began with a strong economic emphasis, but it has also become increasingly strategic in its content” 19. Japan, though not traditionally an Indian Ocean power, is also concerned that “peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Pacific Ocean are inseparable from peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean. Developments affecting each are more closely connected than ever. Japan, as one of the oldest sea-faring democracies in Asia, should play a greater role in preserving the common good in both regions”20.

Compared with the distinct expression of intentions and strategies of aforementioned players, China has long been ambiguous about its Indian Ocean Strategy. In other words, it is largely in lack of a coherence and comprehensive understanding of the region. As major powers begin to invest substantively in their Indian Ocean strategy, China gradually begin to be alerted the very need for playing a more active role in the region. In June 2013, China’s first Blue Book on Indian Ocean Region was published in Beijing, and was regarded as China’s

very first effort to “spell out its strategy and plans to secure its interests in the Indian Ocean”\textsuperscript{21}. There is an visible concern from China that “although security in the Indian Ocean does not face serious threat yet, with the escalating defense efforts of the world and regional powers, the future of the Indian Ocean Region may turn from cooperation and peace into an ocean of conflict and trouble”\textsuperscript{22}. Since China’s commercial and military interests in the region and its interdependence with IOR countries is growing, China need to implement an Indian Ocean Strategy built on the principles to “build common values, to find common interests and promote common development”, a strategy “based on Southeast Asia, expand westward to cover South Asia, Middle East, Africa and the Indian Ocean region in order to strengthen political mutual trust, economic cooperation and cultural exchanges between China and the countries of the Indian Ocean Region” \textsuperscript{23}.

However, in the past few years, China leadership has started to reshuffle its mindset on Indian Ocean Region, and attached more and more importance and invested politically and economically in this region. In May 2013, China’s newly inaugurated Prime Minister Li Keqiang chose India and Pakistan, rather than any other of China’s 14 neighboring countries, as the destinations of his first official trip abroad. Within the year of 2013, the Chinese leadership has successively put forward several new policy initiatives to better connect China with the IOR region, including China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, China-India-Myanmar-Bangladesh Economic Corridor, etc.

Therefore, a peaceful, stable and prosperous IOR and Indo-Pacific is in the significant common interests of U.S., India, Australia, China and Japan, namely major powers of the region. No single country among them could pay the price of potential rising tensions and

possible worst-case scenarios, as brought by asserted mutual suspicion and rivalry among them.

2. Enlarging Inter-Dependence and Interconnectedness Forms Shared Interests

Firstly, the economic size of China, India and U.S. will continue to increase rapidly, thus inter-dependence and inter-connectedness among the three giants are growing. As three of the world’s key players, the three countries in total account for more than 40% of world’s population, 14% of territory and 35% of GDP. According to a report forecasting global economic powers in 2050 published by PWC, China would move into the top position above the U.S. by 2050 and India will surpass Japan and Brazil to become the third largest economic power in the world24. As estimated in the report US-China Economic Relations in the Next 10 Years: Toward Deeper Engagement and Mutual Benefit released by the China-US Exchange Foundation, China and U.S. would both become each other’s largest trading partner in less than a decade 25. At the same time, new leaderships in both Beijing and Washington are now vigorously expanding and deepening their economic, trade and investment relations with New Delhi, expecting to benefit from India’s economic prosperity result from its huge market potential. As trade imbalances between China and India continue to grow in favor of China, both China and India “agreed to explore ways to bridge this gap”26. Similarly, although the U.S. regards India with “great promise as a potential economic partner”, it is “only America’s 13th largest trade partner”, and “the share of Indian trade involves the U.S. is dropping and U.S share of FDI in India is declining rapidly”27. Therefore, boosting economic and trade ties to a higher level, as well as inking the Bilateral Investment Treaty, has become the common concern for both U.S. and India. In this sense, neither of the three giants would be willing to bear the cost of economic and commercial loss brought by strategic rivalry between or among the three powers.

Secondly, the trade routes and sea lanes across the Indian Ocean consists of the most important corridors of the world, serving as choke points for trade and energy imports. Straits of Hormuz, Mandeb and Malacca in the IOR are key lines for energy imports for global energy trade. According to the Journal of the Indian Ocean Region, more than 80 percent of the world’s seaborne trade in oil transits through Indian Ocean choke points, with 40 percent passing through the Strait of Hormuz, 35 percent through the Strait of Malacca and 8 percent through the Bab el-Mandab Strait\(^28\). U.S. Energy Information Agency also agreed that “By volume of oil transit, the Strait of Hormuz, leading out of the Persian Gulf, and the Strait of Malacca, linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans, are two of the world's most strategic chokepoints”\(^29\). However, maritime security and safety and freedom of navigation in IOR is threatened by rising piracy over the past few years.

![Indian Ocean Piracy (2008-2012)](image)

(Source: Risk Intelligence)

Apart from that, as U.S.-Iran tension steps up, Iran has conducted more military exercises, feared by the rest of the world for the possible blockade of the Straits of Hormuz. More than 50% of China’s oil needed to be imported and more than half of the amount have to be transported through the Indian Ocean. Similarly, U.S. and India are also concerned about


\[^{29}\] EIA, World Oil Transit Chokepoints, updated on Aug 22\(^\text{nd}\) 2012, http://www.eia.gov/countries/regions-topics2.cfm?topics=WOTC

freedom of navigation in the waters. Therefore, as the key stakeholders in the safety of these routes and open access to the water, China-India-U.S. trilateral cooperation and coordination on IOR maritime security will be gradually in need in the coming years.

C. Manageable Disputes

1. China-Indian Border Disputes: In the Dawn of Settlement

Sino-Indian unsettled disputes on borderline have been highlighted as one of potential source of instability in the region. Since their border conflict in 1962, China-India relations have been overshadowed by repeated small-scaled frictions along the border region and mutual suspicion of each other’s aggressiveness. However, the general situation remained peaceful and stable, and did not lead to major clash or conflict so far.

Given the lessons from 1962 conflict and clashes afterwards, nowadays both China and India are facing new realities in the strategic environment of bilateral relations. As the both India and China are among the BRICS group, they are regarded as the representatives of the emerging developing countries, and share more common interests than disagreements. Both sides have started to adopt a more pragmatic mindset and approach in dealing with each other, as bilateral economic and trade ties have been also turned into a new bright spot in their relations.

It is the interests and willingness of both China and India to make joint efforts to manage disputes and prevent it from further escalation. In the 50 years anniversary of China-India Border Conflict, India for the first time held a ceremony in memory of the war in 2012. There seemed to be positive change of Indian attitudes towards border. Just as what Indian Defense Minister A K Anthony stated, although India "of today is not the India of 1962. Over the years, successive governments learning lessons from the past strengthened our capabilities
and modernized our armed forces”, India is still willing to hold “dialogue with China to find a solution to the long-pending border dispute and has established a mechanism to immediately settle any tensions on the border”31.

There is also a visible determination from the Chinese side to level up mutual trust and strengthen substantive cooperation with India. After the inauguration of Chinese new leadership in 2013, the first destination that Chinese new Prime Minister Li Keqiang chooses as his very first official trip abroad is India, rather than any country else. Despite the tensions brought by the face-off on the border in April 2013, both sides quickly withdrew their troops. Just 5 months after that, China and India signed the Border Defense Cooperation Agreement. According to Chinese foreign spokeswoman, the agreement “is of great significance for peace and stability along the border between the two countries”. The agreement, built on previous agreements signed in 1993, 1996 and 2005, confirms the practice and experience of border issues in law, and is "of great significance for friendship and trust between the two sides and maintaining peace and stability on the border”32.

In line with the improving status-quo on the border issue, China and India have started to explore potentials in sub-regional cooperation. During Li Keqiang’s visit to India in 2013, both leaderships proposed to explore the possibility to establish a China-India-Myanmar-Bangladesh Economic Corridor, with the aim to strengthen economic cooperation, as well as bilateral and regional connectivity. The idea was proposed in the 1990s in academia and think tanks, and took more than a decade to be translated into real policy. However, it is a strong proof that India and China not only share the willingness but also the capability to consolidate efforts in sub-regional cooperation to achieve a mutually beneficial result.


2. The Evolving U.S.-India Strategic Partnership

Among the major alliances and partnerships of U.S. in the Indo-Pacific region, U.S.-India relations may be considered as one of the most remarkable set. Since the end of the cold war, the India-Soviet alliance dissolved. Successive U.S. administrations re-consider India’s rising strategic value to the U.S. based upon enlarging common interests and values, and gradually leveled up the extent of bilateral partnership. The 911 event formed a strong U.S.-India cooperation in anti-cooperation. The signing of U.S. –India Civil Nuclear Agreement in the 2009 was a major milestone of U.S. encouragement and recognition of India as a key regional and global player. All these visible transformations occurred in an unprecedented speed within less than two decades, compared with U.S. longstanding partnership with its treaty-based alliances (Japan, Republic of Korea, the Philippines, Australia and Thailand) since the end of the World War II in the region.

However, there are unsatisfied hopes and expectations from the largest developed and developing democracies. Most notably, India has upheld the foreign policy based on independence and non-alignment ever since the time of Nehru. It is not willing to simply follow U.S. steps in a subordinate position. As repeated in the report *Non Alignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty First Century* published by a group of Indian Strategists in early 2012, India should stick to the Non Alignment approach, which should “give India maximum options for its own internal development…..to ensure that India did not define its national interest or approach to world politics in terms of ideologies and goals that had been set elsewhere”33. Apart from that, as the strategy of India and U.S. on

Indian Ocean differs distinctly, both sides would feel uneasy about each other’s attempted leadership and possible dominance of the region\(^{34}\).

The dynamics forming the strategic environment of U.S.–India relations experienced great changes. The need to respond to China’s fast rise and its increasing interests in the Indian Ocean, as well as the necessity for better collaboration in post-2014 Afghanistan, act as inevitable impetus that bring India and U.S. even closer. In recent few years, both sides started to prioritize convergences prior to potential disputes, and made visible breakthroughs in most controversial areas for bilateral cooperation. Firstly, on the civil nuclear cooperation, despite stagnation in bilateral negotiation for five years since the signing of the treaty, India and the US signed the landmark civil nuclear deal, the two countries have inked the first commercial agreement on civilian nuclear power cooperation that was stalled over India’s nuclear liability law in Sep. 2013\(^{35}\). Secondly, on defense cooperation, Washington and New Delhi are firming up "practical projects" for joint development and production of defense equipment in India to take the defense relationship between the two countries to the "next level"\(^{36}\) prior to John Kerry’s visit to India in 2013. It is foreseeable that in the near future, the breadth and depth of India-U.S. partnership will be brought up to a new height.

### 3. Summary

Generally speaking, IOR is recognized as more and more important to the national interests of Beijing, New Delhi and Washington. The U.S. views IOR as a vital domain for its implementation of Asia Rebalance Strategy, and its anti-terrorist operations in Afghanistan and the Middle East. China is expanding its influence in IOR and neighboring states, with a view to secure its growing energy imports overseas, strengthen economic ties and enlarge

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overseas investments. India, traditionally the leading power in IOR, is suspicious of foreign intention to dominating the region, and chooses to maintain strategic independence. Although these intentions may be not compatible with each other and brings about disputes, there is currently no major clash of interests or immediate crisis that may lead to direct rivalry in the region. In this sense, mutual trust among the three powers remains to be leveled up, and it is essential that the three players make it clear and transparent their strategic intentions in IOR to each other.

D. China-India-U.S. Trilateral Dialogue: Towards a Win-Win Result

The future of IOR and Indo-Pacific will be largely shaped by power balance among Beijing, New Delhi and Washington. The three countries will possibly become the top three economies in the world, are now having the strongest maritime power in the region, and are all nuclear states. Exploring the possibility of launching China-India-U.S. trilateral dialogue at track-one or track 1.5 level may be the initial step that needs to be taken towards achieving a win-win result in IOR.

1. Existing Mechanisms in the IOR or Indo-Pacific: Lack in the Voice of Beijing

In the Asia Pacific, or more precisely East Asia, regional cooperation has been thriving more years. Most of the existing multilateral mechanisms are either led by the U.S. or ASEAN. U.S. has been the major driving force behind the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, and the ongoing negotiation process of Trans-Pacific Partnership. In contrast, ASEAN has long been in the driver’s seat, if not the most substantive role, of East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN+3, ASEAN+1, etc. Although these mechanisms are neither treaty-based nor rule-based, they have gradually evolved into regular and “soft” platforms for most parties concerned in the region. Experiences in their partnership for the past two decades proved that, specific initiatives for regional cooperation proposed by members of those mechanisms could be turned into real actions of collective collaboration.
Another most visible feature of multilateral mechanisms in the Asia Pacific or East Asia is that, they have all incorporated the most important actors of the region, including the U.S., China, Japan, Korea, ASEAN, etc. Nearly all aforementioned platforms have been centered on these major powers. More prominently, they gradually include members that are not traditionally regarded as Asia-Pacific or East Asia powers, especially India and Russia. In geographical or geopolitical sense, India was not an East Asia power. After it proposed and adopted the Look East policy since 1990s, it significantly leveled up its trade ties and economic engagement with Southeast Asia, as well as security and military cooperation with U.S., Japan and Australia. Despite China’s concerns and reluctance, India joined the East Asia Summit upon its birth in 2005. The case is similar with Russia. Although Russia have long place Eurasia as the top priority in its foreign policy, its understanding of the importance of Asia Pacific are growing rapidly, and have acceded into East Asia Summit in 2005.

Compared with Asia Pacific or East Asia, it is not true to state that there are no single multilateral mechanisms for major powers in the IOR. In fact, emerging regional cooperation in IOR has been growing largely over the past few years. Developing platforms including official cooperation or track 1.5 or 2 dialogues among U.S.-Japan-India, U.S.- India-Australia, as well as U.S.-Japan-India-Australia.

The official U.S.-Japan-India trilateral meeting was launched in 2011 and held for four times till now. Long before that, held by Center for Strategic and International Studies, Japan Institute of International Affairs and Aspen Institute, the track-2 dialogue among the three countries have been held about ten times since its birth in 2006. In line with these dialogues, U.S., India and Japan are the main sponsors of the Mallabar joint military exercise in the Indian Ocean since 2007. Issues discussed among the three included but are not limited to maritime security, counter-terrorism, Afghanistan situation, Pakistan situation, anti-piracy,
humanitarian relief, DPRK issue, etc. Although not stated publicly, there’s the obvious China factor behind the scene. After the 1st U.S.-Japan-India trilateral meeting in 2011, the three sides announced it clearly that the dialogue is not aimed at isolating or containing China. In the trilateral meeting in 2012, issues South China Sea and Diaoyu Island disputes were discussed and brought up. As China has become one of the main competitors for strategic influence with the U.S. in Asia-Pacific, to encourage New Delhi and Tokyo to pursue a self-help strategy against China is in favor of U.S. . Despite possible divergence of interests between U.S.-India and U.S.-Japan, U.S. regards Japan and India as “the only Japanese and Indians we have, and a bolder vision for these critical partnerships is essential”.

Proposals for U.S.-India-Australia trilateral cooperation and dialogue have been widely discussed. According to the report Shared Goals, Converging Interests: A Plan for U.S.-Australia-India Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific published by Lowy Institute for International Policy, the Heritage Foundation and Observer’s Foundation, The U.S., Australia, and India face common challenges and opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region that are defined by their shared values and interests, including sea-lane security, counterterrorism, nonproliferation, and disaster relief. They also propose for a formal trilateral dialogue, which “gives these three countries an opportunity to understand and act together to address current and future challenges more effectively”. Whether this triangle is aimed at containing the emerging status of China in the Indo-Pacific is still ambiguous. Some experts stated that since “Australia and India have contiguous zones of maritime interest, and it is no secret that Australia and India have a common interest in understanding and managing the impact of a

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38 He Cheng, Background and Prospect of U.S.-Japan-India Triilateral Cooperation, Contemporary International Relations, No. 2 2013
rising China on the Indo-Pacific strategic order”.\(^4^1\) However, some others also pointed out that “it is wrong to view the proposed India-Australia-US cooperation agreement as a military pact being planned to contain the rising influence of China”.\(^4^2\) The impact of India-Australia-US cooperation on China is yet to be assessed.

Apart from the discussed two forming triangles, a quadrilateral collaboration consisting of U.S., Japan, India and Australia has also been put forward. According to Former and incumbent Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, U.S., Japan, India and Australia should work jointly as a Quadrilateral Group or the Democratic Security Diamond. He was concerned that “China’s naval and territorial expansion would advance at the pace that it has since 2007”, and called for a necessary “strategy whereby Australia, India, Japan, and the US state of Hawaii form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific”\(^4^3\). Since 2007, The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue\(^4^4\) among the four powers have been ongoing paralleled by the joint military exercise Malabar. In response to China as a rising power, such initiatives and arrangements could easily trigger China’s uneasiness.

A conclusion could be easily drawn out from the assessments discussed above. The forming and existing structures in the IOR or the Indo-Pacific have incorporated key players in the large picture of regional politics, except for the presence of China. It is worrisome that while China is widely considered as an emerging power either in the Indo-Pacific and the IOR, its voice and presence is seriously absent, due to the outcome of purposely or unpurposely isolation in regional mechanism. For key players in the regions, it is vital to reshuffle their mindsets and act to maintain the inclusiveness of regional multilateral mechanisms. Such


efforts will be conducive to coordinating more broadly the shared strategic, security and economic interests of those players, including but not limited to China, U.S. and India.

2. A Way Out: the China-U.S.-India Dialogue?

There could never be positive prospect for China-U.S.-India balance without getting rid of the Cold War mentality and the logic of zero-sum game. It is detrimental for the region’s peace and stability, to have India and U.S. together to contain the rise of China, or to have India and China working together to squeeze out the influence of the U.S. The rise of China as global economic powers and their emergence as regional military powers will continue. It is against the interests of the U.S. and India in the IOR to come to a direct conflict with China. Similarly, although U.S. global power is in a relevant decline due to its economic recession and budgetary austerity, it would not become the reality to have an IOR without any influence or presence of U.S.

Policymakers in Washington, New Delhi and Beijing should be clearly aware that, it is imperative to bring China into the picture of mechanisms of the IOR and Indo-Pacific. The recognition of the fact that no single mechanism could succeed in managing disputes and resolving conflicts in IOR and Info-Pacific without engaging China, is a prerequisite for achieving a peaceful and prosperous region. In this sense, launching China-India-U.S. trilateral dialogue would be a crucial step forward. No matter it is at an official level, or a track 1.5/2 form, to establish such a platform would be conducive to for all three sides to clarify their interests and intentions of this region, and thus step up the mutual understanding and trust among China, India and U.S..

Issues discussed at the dialogue might include but are not limited to anti-piracy efforts, counter-terrorism cooperation, maritime security, freedom and safety of navigation in the waters of Indian Ocean, bilateral or multilateral economic cooperation and integration,
education and cultural exchanges, other non-traditional security issues, etc. Tri-lateral cooperation could begin at specific areas rather than strategic and political level. Preliminary talks could be initiated among scholars, experts, former diplomats and officials, and gradually bring in more incumbent officials. Over time, such interactions prevent China, India and U.S. from stepping into direct clashes, and minimum the possibility of turning the Indian Ocean into “an ocean of conflict and trouble” if the three powers could engage each other more constructively. As their interests in the region become more and more overlapping, direct and frank dialogues and communications among the triangle would certainly make contributions to a win-win result of the China-India-U.S. balance.

3. How could China, India and U.S. Make it Possible to achieve a Win-Win Result?

Apart from initiating a new policy dialogue among China, India and U.S., there are still several not only necessary, but also plausible steps that the three need to take to achieve a win-win result.

Firstly, leaderships from of the three powers need to be aware that in the age of globalization and regional integration, increasing interdependence and connectedness make interests and concerns of countries more overlapping and converged with each other than ever before. The cold-war mentality of zero-sum game will no longer be in the interest of any country, which is an indispensable fact that not only status quo powers like U.S. but also rising powers as China and India must accept. Each of the three sides needs to accommodate other’s legitimate interests, which in return, will make it more possible for its own interests to be respected and realized in the region.

Secondly, China, India and U.S. should start to clarify its intentions and understand each other's intention honestly and clearly in the IOR region. As all three actors have increasing stakes in IOR and Indo-Pacific region, it is of great importance to prevent them from
misunderstanding and misinterpret other’s intentions and policies. To make Indian Ocean an ocean of peace rather than conflict, China, India and U.S. should make it clear to each other that they are not purposed to militarily dominate and form a threatening posture against others, and that they have the willingness and sincerity to build political trust and achieve economic reciprocity with each other.